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Mum's the War

by Tad Szulc

Now, nearly four years after the fact, we know that acting under President Nixon's personal authority, US military units engaged in almost daily ground incursions into Cambodia during 1969 as part of broad top-secret intelligence operations ranging over much of Southeast Asia.

These incursions, known by the code name "Salem House," involved at different times US army special forces (Green Berets), Central Intelligence Agency operatives, South Vietnamese Rangers, Khmer Serei detachments of ethnic Cambodians from South Vietnam and Chinese Nhung mercenaries. They were coordinated with secret B-52 and tactical US air strikes against targets in Cambodia that went on for 14 months in 1969 and 1970. The Pentagon acknowledged last month that it had been falsifying reports about the Cambodian air strikes to give the impression for "diplomatic reasons" that the B-52 raids were being conducted only over South Vietnam. Disclosures about "Salem House" raids into Cambodia and other concealed intelligence activities in Southeast Asia came in recent days in interviews with former CIA agents and military specialists who had served with the National Security Agency, which covertly synchronized all these operations.

Some clandestine crossings by special forces teams as deep as 30 miles into Cambodia occurred in 1967 and 1968, but the operation was put on a virtually daily basis in February 1969, immediately after Nixon took office. The Senate Armed Forces Committee began re-

ceiving corroborating testimony last week from former members of Green Beret squads about clandestine cross-border operations.

But new information obtained by *The New Republic* shows that in addition to the Cambodian incursions, secret US operations in Southeast Asia included:

- Training of Khmer Serei units (also known as Mike Forces) at two CIA camps in Greece. Khmers Serei were flown to Greece in mid-1969 under the so-called "doctrine of plausible denial," meaning that such training, if suspected, could be credibly denied. It was under the same concept that the CIA earlier trained Tibetan guerrillas in Colorado. At his Senate confirmation hearings on July 3, William E. Colby, the new CIA director, acknowledged that the agency had worked "from time to time" with George Papadopoulos, the Greek military leader and now President, but refused to say whether, as alleged, he had ever been on the CIA payroll. At one point in 1969, the Khmers Serei were supposed to be used by the US in a coup against Prince Norodom Sihanouk's regime, something the administration also disclaimed.

- Cross-border commando raids into China from Laotian territory in 1969, involving special forces and CIA advisers.

- So-called "Ferret Flights" by US aircraft over the Chinese border to force Chinese jet fighters to scramble and thus allow NSA experts to work out radar plots of China's air defenses. These flights, code-named "Ceflyn Lion," "Sentinel Eagle," and "Sentinel Sarah," were conducted during 1969 from air bases in Thailand, although high-flying RB-71 reconnaissance planes based in the US were also used.

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► Covert actions in Burma at the confluence of Thai and Chinese borders. The CIA station in Bangkok was in charge of these activities.

The secret incursions into Cambodia were comparable to raids by US units into Laos, known as "Operation Prairie Fire." The latter were kept up until 1972. A large-scale secret 1969 penetration in Laos, designed to cut the flow of supplies over the Ho Chi Minh trail, involved a sizable marines unit. "Salem House" raids into Cambodia were no longer required after US troops openly moved into that country during the May 1970 offensive.

Both the secret bombings and ground incursions in 1969 were in flagrant contradiction to President Nixon's statement on April 30, 1970, that prior to the invasion US policy had been "to respect scrupulously the neutrality of the Cambodian people." Senior Defense Department officials privately confirming the "Salem House" and "Prairie Fire" operations, now say they had been "cleared from the very top." Under questioning, they admit that President Nixon had personally authorized them as top-secret operations in the same way in which he cleared the 3360 B-52 sorties over Cambodia in 1969 and 1970.

Late in July the Pentagon hinted that special operations may have been conducted in Cambodia and Laos when it announced that 121 US servicemen, officially reported as having been killed in Vietnam, actually

died in the two adjoining countries.

Highly classified intelligence operations in South-east Asia in 1969 and afterward were run by a complex secret command chain attached to the US Military Advisory Command, Vietnam (MACV), in Saigon, including representatives of the army, the air force, the CIA and the National Security Agency.

NSA groups utilizing military and civilian electronic intelligence specialists worked covertly in Vietnam and were known as Direct Support Units (DSU). Their task was to coordinate intelligence and combat operations on all levels with special emphasis on targeting air strikes and ground crossings in Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam.

Cross-border operations into Cambodia were usually conducted by a special Green Berets unit identified as "B57" and composed of Special Forces and CIA personnel. Green Berets are divided into "A" and "B" detachments, the latter being operational. In so-called "unilateral" operations, only US personnel crossed into Cambodia from a series of "B57" bases strung along the Cambodian border in Vietnam.

"Bilateral" crossings involved Americans as well as Khmer Serei, South Vietnamese and Nhung units. Bilateral and unilateral crossings were also conducted in Cambodia from Thailand.

According to Winslow Peck, a former air force staff sergeant who served in Vietnam as an NSA analyst and liaison official with the Army Security Agency, and other intelligence sources, NSA "targeting" for Cambodia began in February 1969. Peck, who now is a member of a Washington-based organization known as The Committee for Action Research on the Intelligence Community (CARIC), said in an interview that he was attached during 1969 to the Eighth Radio Research Unit based at Phu Bai in Vietnam, then the headquarters of the Fifth Special Forces Group. The Eighth R.R.U. was part of the 509th Radio Research Group which, in turn, was controlled by the Army Security Agency.

CARIC, a private group of former intelligence agents, is dedicated to public dissemination of information about the doings of US intelligence agencies.

The 509th R.R.G. and the air force's 6994th Security Squadron formed a joint operational office known as ACC and located at the Seventh Air Force command in Saigon. ACC was the top-secret electronic intelligence operations center. Pentagon sources said ACC stood for Airborne-Radio-Direction-Finder Coordination Center. It was staffed with specialists from the 404th Special Operations Detachment of the NSA, the agency's force assigned to Vietnam. NSA units in Vietnam—the DSUs—belonged to Bravo Group, the special office in charge of Indochina operations at NSA's headquarters at Ft. Mead, near Washington.

ACC in Saigon, according to Peck and other former intelligence specialists, provided intelligence support



"Your i... Vietnam is inoperative. He died

MAC/V-SOG was divided into three separate segments: Command and Control North, Command and Control Center and Command and Control South. Each SOG command was responsible for cross-border operations in its area. SOG/North infiltrated teams into the Demilitarized Zone and North Vietnam. SOG/Center and South were in charge of "Salem House" raids in Cambodia and "Prairie Fire" in Laos. Most of the Cambodian incursions were directed by SOG/Center in Kontum. Targeting for air strikes and ground operations was the responsibility of Peck's NSA unit based at Phu Bai and Kontum. Peck said in the interview that his function was to serve as NSA analyst for air reconnaissance missions over north-eastern Cambodia which was known as "Variant 12." The air missions were code-named "Combat Cougar." A Combat Cougar mission was usually flown by a C-47 aircraft jammed with highly sophisticated electronic radio direction finding gear and carrying NSA experts.

When an NSA controller aboard a Combat Cougar plane spotted a North Vietnamese or Vietcong unit or depot, he radioed the information to the nearest NSA Direct Support Unit on the ground in Vietnam or in the air. The NSA unit, in turn, passed on its intelligence to ACC in Saigon. The ACC informed SOG and a determination was made whether an air strike, artillery fire or a B57 ground crossing was required. NSA experts in the guise of Direct Support Unit personnel were attached to each B57 detachment to serve as electronic intelligence advisers. The planes used in these missions over Cambodia and Laos used the Kontum airfield. CANUC was the code designation in NSA channels for communications related to Cambodian air and ground activities.

Peck said that cross-border operations were usually designed to find and destroy Communist "ban trams," which were North Vietnamese and Vietcong arms and food depots inside Cambodia. Some of the B57 missions were known as SEAM (Search, Locate, Annihilate Mission). Others were designed to check the patterns of Communist troops and supply movements inside Cambodia. Harassment of Communist areas was another mission of the B57 units. Pentagon officials described all these missions as "trail-watching" operations when they were asked last week about the 1969 incursions.

In all cases, Peck said, the incursions into Cambodia and Laos—sometimes on foot and sometimes by helicopter—were guided by Combat Cougar flights that fed electronic intelligence to ACC and SOG. Peck and other former intelligence specialists involved in these operations said in interviews that the crossings into Cambodia and Laos were far from successful and that B57 units often suffered heavy losses. He said a Combat Cougar C-47 was shot down in 1969 with the loss

of 12 lives.

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a Forces and CIA agents wore North Vietnamese uniforms or "sterile" fatigues, uniforms without any unit or rank insignias. They went into the Cambodian jungles with their faces greased black, commando style.

Peck and others said that during 1969, there were 23 separate types of intelligence flights in Southeast Asia. Since the US withdrawal from Vietnam, Combat Cougar missions have been switched to the Ramasun NSA-CIA base near the Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand. Other sources say these missions are still being flown in support of the US bombings in Cambodia. Ramasun is the present headquarters of the Seventh Radio Research Field Station that earlier operated at Phu Bai. The air force's 6994th Security Squadron has moved to the Nakorn Phanom base in Thailand.

According to Peck and other intelligence officers who served in Indochina, plans were afoot in 1969 to mount a coup against Sihanouk, and that the Khmer Serei "Mike Forces" were being trained in Laos, South Vietnam and Greece for that purpose. The proposed coup, coordinated by the CIA, was known in the intelligence community as "Operation Dewey Canyon II." Earlier covert operations in Laos by US military units, including elements of the Ninth marine division, were code-named Dewey Canyon I. Officials in Washington refuse to discuss the reported plans for the 1969 coup and will not say why it was cancelled. Sihanouk was subsequently overthrown in March 1970—two months before the US invasion—and has since lived in Peking.

The new disclosures of secret US air and ground operations in Cambodia have served to emphasize that the Nixon administration systematically and in a highly organized fashion had been violating Cambodian sovereignty since 1969, while charging North Vietnam with aggression. The ground operations in the Laotian panhandle were in violation of 1969 legislation. This long history of secret involvements raises questions as to the plans of the Nixon administration in Cambodia after US bombings cease on August 15 under the compromise resolution worked out in July between the Senate and the White House. US air power—and its intelligence support facilities—remain in Thailand and surely the administration must feel tempted to use it in some fashion after this week's deadline. There certainly is precedent for new covert enterprises.

In an affidavit filed with the Supreme Court on August 4 seeking a stay of a lower court order for an immediate cessation of the bombing, Secretary of State William P. Rogers said that Cambodian forces would be redeployed after the deadline "from exposed positions to positions where they can defend themselves and be resupplied in the absence of US combat support." That was the most intriguing phrase of the week.